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PROLOGUE.

It was in the woods that the girl of the Limberlost found her education, her love, her happiness and other good things, so, rightly, the air of the trees is in this story of her life. Here is a tale for lovers of the woods and for others who like a simple story well told by one who knows the forest, can tell about "home folks" and can find the interest in everyday lives. Through these pages flutter the brilliant butterfly of tangled romance, the more sober butterfly, no less beautiful, of noble, quiet lives, well lived, and the gray moth of sorrow borne needlessly for many years. And if you listen closely you may hear the buzz of the little, busy existence of Billy, a youngster worth your knowing.

SYNOPSIS

Although a good scholar, Elnora Comstock, entering high school, is ashamed by her country dress. She needs \$2 for books and tuition fees. Her mother is unsympathetic, and Elnora tells her troubles to Wesley Sinton, an old neighbor.

When Elnora was born her father was drowned in a swamp, embittering her mother's life. Elnora determines to raise money by gathering forest specimens. The Sinton family clothes her for her.

Elnora, getting her books cheaply, finds a market with the Bird Woman for butterflies, Indian relics, etc.

Mrs. Comstock's devotion to her husband's memory will not permit her to sell trees or have old wells dug on her land. The Sinton family brings Elnora new clothing.

Elnora is delighted with her outfit. Her mother says she must pay for it. Wesley and Margaret Sinton discuss the girl's affairs.

Pete Corson, a Limberlost frequenter, warns Elnora not to visit the Limberlost at night or go far into the swamp at any time.

Billy, a bright but untrained little chap, with a shiftless father and hungry brother and sister, gets Elnora's luncheon. Wesley, troubled by Corson's warning, investigates.

Sadie Reed laughed shortly. "You needn't trouble," she said, "I was fooled. I thought they were expensive quills. I wanted them for a twenty dollar velvet toque to match my new suit. If they are picked off the ground, really, I couldn't use them."

"Only in spots," said Elnora. "They don't just cover the earth. Phoebe Simms' peacocks are the only ones within miles of Onabasha, and they moult but once a year. If your hat only cost \$20 it's hardly good enough for those quills. You see, the Almighty made and colored those himself, and he puts the same kind on Phoebe Simms' peacocks that he put on the head of the family in the forests of Ceylon away back in the beginning. Any old manufactured quill from New York or Chicago will do for your little twenty dollar hat. You ought to have something infinitely better than that to be worthy of quills that are made by the Creator."

How those girls did laugh! One of them walked by Elnora to the auditorium, sat with her during exercises and tried to talk whenever she dared to keep Elnora from seeing the curious and admiring looks bent upon her. For the brown eyed boy whistled, and there was pantomime of all sorts going on behind Elnora's back that day. Happy with her books no one knew how much she saw, and from her absorption in her studies it was evident she cared too little to notice. It soon developed that to be inconspicuous and to work was all Elnora craved.

After school she went again to the home of the Bird Woman, and together they visited the swamp and took away more specimens. This time Elnora asked the Bird Woman to keep the money until noon of the next day, when she would call for it and have it

There was no way any one could have reached it without a ladder, for the logs were hewed and mortar filled the cracks even. Then he went to the west end. The willow faced him as he turned the corner. He examined the trunk carefully. There was no mistake about small particles of black swamp muck adhering to the sides of the tree. He reached the low branches and climbed the willow. There was earth on the large limb crossing Elnora's window. He stood on it, holding the branch as had been done the night before, and looked into the room. He could see very little, but he knew that if it had been dark outside and sufficiently light for Elnora to study inside he could have seen vividly. He brought his face close to the netting, and he could see the bed with its head to the east, at its foot the table with the candles and the chair before it, and then he knew where the man had been who had heard Elnora's prayer.

Mrs. Comstock had followed around the corner and stood watching him. "Do you think some slinking hulk was up there peekin' in at Elnora?" she demanded indignantly.

"There is muck on the trunk and plenty on the limb," said Sinton. "Haden't you better get a saw and let me take this branch off?"

"No, I hadn't," said Mrs. Comstock. "First place, Elnora's climbed from that window on that limb all her life, and it's hers; second place, no one gets ahead of me after I've had warning. Any crow that perches on that roost again will get its feathers somewhat scattered. Look along the fence there and see if you can find where he came in."

The place was easy to find as was a trail leading for some distance west of the cabin.

"You just go home and don't fret yourself," said Mrs. Comstock. "I'll take care of this. If you should hear the dinner bell at any time in the night you come down. But I wouldn't say anything to Elnora. She best keep her mind on her studies if she's going to school."

CHAPTER VIII.

Wherein Mrs. Comstock Indulges in "Frills" and Billy Reappears.

It was Wesley Sinton who really wrestled with the problem as he drove about his business. He did not have to ask himself what it meant; he knew. The old Corson gang was still holding together. Elder members who had escaped the law had been joined by a younger brother of Jack's, and they met in the thickest of the swamp to drink, gamble and loaf. Then, suddenly, there would be a robbery in some country house where a farmer that day had sold his wheat or corn and not paid a visit to the bank, or in some neighboring village.

The home of Mrs. Comstock and Elnora adjoined the swamp. Sinton's land lay next, and not another residence or man easy to reach in case of trouble. Whoever wrote that note had some human kindness in his breast, but the fact stood revealed that he feared his strength if Elnora was delivered into his hands. Where had he been the previous night when he heard that prayer? Was that the first time he had been in such proximity? Sinton drove fast, for he wished to reach the swamp before Elnora and the Bird Woman would go there for more mounds.

At almost 4 he came to the case, and dropping on his knees studied the ground, every sense alert. He found two or three little heel prints. Those were made by Elnora or the Bird Woman. What Sinton wanted to learn was whether all the rest were the footprints of one man. It was easily seen they were not. There were deep, even tracks made by fairly new shoes, and others where a well worn heel cut deeper on the inside of the print than at the outer edge. Undoubtedly some of Corson's old gang were watching the case and the visits of the women to it. There was no danger that anyone would attack the Bird Woman. She never went to the swamp at night, and on her trips in the daytime every one knew that she carried a revolver, understood how to use it and pursued her work in a fearless manner.

Sinton was afraid for Elnora, yet he did not want to add the burden of fear to Katharine Comstock's trouble or to disturb the joy of Elnora in her work. He stopped at the cabin and slowly went up the walk. Mrs. Comstock was sitting on the front step with some sewing. She dropped her work on her lap, laid her hands on it and looked into his face with a sneer.

"You didn't let any grass grow under your feet," she said.

Sinton saw her white, drawn face and comprehended.

"I went to pay a debt and see about this opening of the ditch, Kate."

"You said you were going to prosecute me."

"Good gracious, Kate!" cried Sinton. "Is that what you have been thinking all day? I told you before I left yesterday that I would not need to do that. I want to ask you if you ever see anything about the swamp that makes you think the old Corson gang is still alive?"

"Can't say that I do," said Mrs. Comstock. "There's kind of dancing lights there sometimes, but I supposed it was just people passing along the road with lanterns."

"Kate, I have got to tell you something. Elnora stopped at the case this morning, and somebody had been into it in the night."

"Broke the lock?"

"No. Used a duplicate key. Today I heard there was a man here last night. I want to nose around a little."

Sinton went to the east end of the cabin and looked up at the window.

"I thought it wasn't polite to look before people," answered Elnora. "Of course I will if you would like to have me."

Elnora opened the package. She had been presented with a quarter of a stale loaf of baker's bread and a big piece of ancient bologna.

"But don't you want this yourself?" she asked in surprise.

"Gosh, no! I mean let plain no," said the boy. "We always have it. We got stacks this morning. Pa's come out of it now, and he's so sorry he got more 'n ever we can eat. Have you had any before?"

"No," said Elnora, "I never did."

The boy's eyes brightened and the girl moved restlessly.

"We thought maybe you hadn't," said the boy. "First you ever have, you like it real well, but when you don't have anything else for a long time, years 'n' years, you git so tired."

He hitched at the string which held his trousers and eyed Elnora speculatively.

"I don't s'pose you'd trade what you got in that box for 1st old bread and bologna now, would you? Mebbe you'd like it! And I know, I let know, what you got would taste like heaven to Jimmy and Belle. They never had nothing like that. Not even Belle, and she's most ten. No, sirree, they never tasted things like you got."

Elnora knelt on the bridge, opened the box and divided her lunch into three equal parts, the smaller boy getting most of the milk. Then she told them it was school time and she must go.

"Why don't you put your bread and bologna in the nice box?" asked the boy.

"Of course," said Elnora. "I didn't think."

When the box was arranged to the children's satisfaction all of them accompanied Elnora to the corner where she turned toward the high school. Elnora and Billy led the way, Jimmy and Belle followed.

"Billy," said Elnora, "I would like you much better if you were cleaner. Surely you have water. Can't you children get some soap and wash yourselves? Gentlemen are never dirty. You want to be a gentleman, don't you?"

"Is being clean all you have to do to be a gentleman?"

"No," said Elnora. "You must not say bad words and you must be kind and polite to your sister."

"Must Belle be kind and polite to me, else she ain't a lady?"

"Yes."

"Then Belle's no lady?" said Billy succinctly.

Elnora could say nothing more just then, and she bade them goodby and started home.

"The poor little souls!" she mused. "I think the Almighty put them in my way to show me real trouble. I won't be likely to spend much time pitying myself while I can see them."

She glanced at the lunch box. "What on earth do I carry this for? I never had anything that was so strictly ornamental! One sure thing! I can't take this stuff to the high school. You never seem to know just what is going to happen to you while you are there."

As if to provide a way out of her difficulty a big dog arose from a lawn and came toward the gate, wagging his tail. "If those children ate the stuff, it can't possibly kill him!" thought Elnora, so she offered the bologna. The dog accepted it graciously, and, being a pedigreed beast, he trotted around to a side porch and laid the bologna before his mistress. The woman snatched it, screaming, "Come, quick! Some one is trying to poison Pedro!" Her daughter came running from the house. "Go see who is on the street. Hurry!" cried the excited mother.

Ellen Brownlee ran and looked. Elnora was a half block away, and no one nearer. Ellen called loudly, and Elnora stopped. Ellen came running toward her.

"Did you see anyone give our dog something?" she cried as she approached.

Elnora saw no escape.

"I gave it a piece of bologna myself," she said. "It was fit to eat. It wouldn't hurt the dog."

Ellen stood and looked at her. "Of course, I didn't know it was your dog," explained Elnora, and she told Ellen about Billy and Jimmy and Belle and the sacrificed luncheons.

"Wait until I run back and tell mother about the dog, and get my books," said Ellen.

Elnora waited, and that morning she walked down the hall and into the auditorium beside one of the very nicest girls in Onabasha, and it was the fourth day. But the surprise came at noon when Ellen insisted upon Elnora lunching at the Brownlee home and convulsed her parents and family and overwhelmed Elnora by a greatly magnified but moderately accurate history of her lunch box.

"Gee, but it's a box, daddy!" cried the laughing girl. "It's carved leather and fastens with a strap that's got her name on it. Inside are trays for things all complete, and it bears evidence of having inclosed delicious food, but Elnora never gets any. She's carried it two days now, and both times it has been empty before she reached school. Isn't that killing?"

"It is, Ellen. In more ways than one. No girl is going to eat breakfast at 6 o'clock, walk three miles and do good work with no lunch. You can't tell me anything about that box. I sold it last Monday night to Wesley Sinton, one of my good country customers. He told me it was a present for a girl who was worthy of it, and I see he was right."

When Elnora entered the coat room after having had luncheon with Ellen Brownlee there was such a difference

in the atmosphere that she could feel it.

"I am almost sorry I have these clothes," she said to Ellen.

"In the name of sense, why?" cried the astonished girl.

"Every one is so nice to me in them, it just sets me to wondering if in time I could have made them be equally friendly in the others."

Ellen looked at her introspectively.

"Well, yes, I believe you could," she announced at last. "But it would have taken time and heartache, and your mind would have been less free to work on your studies. No one is happy without friends, and I just simply can't study when I am unhappy."

That night the Bird Woman made the last trip to the swamp. Every specimen she possibly could use had been purchased at a fair price, and three additions had been made to the bank book, carrying the total to a little past \$200. There remained the Indian relics to sell on Saturday, and Elnora had secured the order to furnish material for nature work for the grades. Life suddenly grew very full. There was the most excitingly interesting work for every hour, and that work was to pay high school expenses and start the college fund. There was just one little rift in her joy. All of it would have been so much better if she could have told her mother and given the money into her keeping. But the struggle to get a start had been so terrible, Elnora was afraid to take the risk.

When she reached home she only told her mother that the last of the things had been sold that evening.

"I think," said Mrs. Comstock, "that we will get Wesley to move that box over here back of the garden for you. There you are apt to get tolled farther into the swamp than you intend to go, and you might mire or something. There ought to be just the same things in our woods and along our swampy places as there are in the Limberlost. Can't you hunt your stuff here?"

"I can try," said Elnora. "I don't know what I can find until I do. Our woods are undisturbed, and there is a possibility they might be even better hunting than the swamp. But I wouldn't have Freckles' case moved for the world. He might come back some day and not like it. I've tried to keep his room the best I could, and taking out the box would make a great hole in one side of it. Store boxes don't cost much. I will have Uncle Wesley buy me one and set it up wherever hunting looks the best early in the spring. I would feel safer at home."

CHAPTER IX.

Wherein Mrs. Comstock Manipulates Margaret, and Billy Acquires a Residence.

Elnora hurried upstairs to change her dress. Margaret Sinton came that night, bringing a beautiful blue one in its stead and carried away the other to launder.

"Do you mean to say those dresses are to be washed every two days?" questioned Mrs. Comstock.

"They have to be to look fresh," replied Margaret. "We want our girl sweet as a rose."

"Well, of all things!" cried Mrs. Comstock. "Every two days! Any girl who can't keep a dress clean longer than that is a dirty girl. You'll wear the goods out and fade the colors with so much washing."

"We'll have a clean girl anyway."

"Well, if you like the job you can have it," said Mrs. Comstock. "I don't mind the washing, but I'm so inconvenient with an iron."

Elnora sat late that night working hard over her lessons. The next morning she put on her blue dress and ribbon, and in those she was a picture. Mrs. Comstock caught her breath with a queer stirring around her heart and looked twice to be sure of what she saw. As Elnora gathered her books her mother silently gave her the lunch box.

"Feels heavy," said Elnora gayly.

"And smelly!"

Elnora went down the road thinking of the children with whom she probably would divide. Of course, the bridge would be occupied again. So she stopped and opened the box. Undoubtedly Mrs. Comstock was showing Margaret Sinton the "frills." The cake was still fresh, and there were four slices. The sandwiches had to be tasted twice before Elnora discovered that beechnuts had been used in a peanut recipe, and they were a great improvement. There were preserved strawberries in the cup, potato salad with mint and cucumber in the dish and a beautifully browned squab from the stable loft.

"I don't want to be selfish," murmured Elnora, "but it just seems as if I can't give away this lunch. If mother did not put love into it she's substituted something that's likely to fool me."

She almost felt her steps lagging as she approached the bridge. A very hungry dog had been added to the trio of children. Elnora loved all dogs and, as usual, this one came to her in friendliness. The children said "Good morning!" with alacrity, and another paper parcel lay conspicuous.

"How are you this morning?" inquired Elnora.

"All right," cried the three, while the dog sniffed ravenously at the lunch box and beat a perfect tattoo with his tail.

"How did you like the bologna?" questioned Billy eagerly.

"One of the girls took me to lunch at her home yesterday," answered Elnora.

Dawn broke beautifully over Billy's streaked face. He caught the package and thrust it toward Elnora.

"Then maybe you'd like to try the bologna today!"

The dog leaped in glad apprehension of something, and Belle scrambled to her feet and took a step forward. The look of famished greed in her eyes was more than Elnora could bear. She opened the box and divided the milk between Billy and the girl. She gave each a piece of cake leaving one and a sandwich. Billy pressed forward eagerly, bitter disappointment on his face, and the elder boy forgot his charge.

"Aw, I thought they'd be meat!" lamented Billy.

Elnora gave way.

"There is!" she said gladly. "There is a little pigeon bird. I want just a teeny piece of the breast, for a sort of keepsake, just one bite, and you can have the rest among you."

Elnora drew the knife from its holder and cut off the wishbone. Then she held the bird toward the girl.

"You can divide it," she said. The dog made a bound and seized the squab sprang from the bridge and ran for life. The girl and boy hurried after him. With awful eyes Billy stared and swore tempestuously. Elnora



The Girls Scattered Before Him.

caught him and clapped her hand over the little mouth. A delivery wagon came tearing down the street, the horse running full speed, passed the fleeing dog with the girl and boy in pursuit and stopped at the bridge. High school girls began to roll from all sides of it.

"A rescue, a rescue!" they shouted.

It was Ellen Brownlee and her crowd, and every girl of them carried a big parcel. They took in the scene as they approached. The fleeing dog, with something in its mouth, the half naked girl and boy chasing it, told the story. Those girls screamed with laughter as they watched the pursuit.

"Thank goodness, I saved the wishbone," said Elnora. "As usual, I can prove that there was a bird." She turned toward the box. Billy had improved the time. He had the last piece of cake in one hand and the last bite of salad disappeared in one great gulp. Then the girls shouted again.

"Let's have a sample ourselves," suggested one. She caught up the box and handed out the remaining sandwich. Another girl divided it into bites each little over an inch square, and then she lifted the cup lid and deposited a preserved strawberry on each bite. "One, two, three—altogether now!" she cried.

Billy let out a roar. "You old mean things!" he screamed.

In an instant he was down in the road and handfuls of dust began to fly among them. The girls scattered before him.

"Billy!" cried Elnora. "Billy! I'll never give you another bite as long as I live if you throw dust on any one!"

Then Billy dropped the dust, bored both fists into his eyes and fled sobbing into Elnora's new blue skirt. She stooped to meet him and consolation began.

After the luncheon was given to the three children Elnora was hustled into the wagon with the girls and driven on the run to the high school. They sang a song beginning:

Elnora, please give me a sandwich; I'm ashamed to ask for cake,

as they went on. Elnora did not know it, but that was her initiation. She belonged to "the crowd." She only knew that she was happy and vaguely wondered what her mother and Aunt Margaret would have said about the proceedings.

Saturday morning Elnora helped her mother with the work. When she had finished Mrs. Comstock told her to go to Sinton's and wash her Indian relics so that she would be ready to accompany Wesley to town in the afternoon. Elnora hurried down the road and was soon at the cistern with a tub busily washing arrow points, stone axes, tubes, pipes and skin cleaning implements. There were not so many points as she had supposed, and some she had thought the finest were clipped and broken. Still there was quite a large box of perfect pieces to carry to the city.

Then Elnora hurried home, dressed and was waiting when the carriage reached the gate. She stopped at the bank with the box, and Sinton went to do his marketing and a little shopping for his wife.

At the dry goods store Mr. Brownlee called to him: "Hello, Sinton! How do you like the fate of your lunch box?" Then he began to laugh.

"I always hate to see a man laughing alone," said Sinton. "It looks so self-

(Continued next week.)